

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – pornography or morality lesson?

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In her prizewinning essay, Ellie explores Ovid's delicate – and deliberately provocative – balancing-act between moral reprehension and pornographic tease in one of the most shocking tales in the *Metamorphoses*, the story of Myrrha's incestuous love affair with her father Cinyras. The central point of Ovid's story is not, it seems, to provide easy answers, but rather to provoke the most difficult questions...

Of the *Metamorphoses'* many themes, love is one of the most prominent. Ovid was first and foremost a writer of love poetry, and although he had formally drawn a line under this part of his career by the time he completed the *Metamorphoses* in A.D. 8, his fascination with human relationships is still evident throughout this poem. Many of his love stories are comical and light-hearted, but he does not shy away from the explicit or the disturbing – of the 250 myths that appear in the *Metamorphoses*, about a fifth are about rapes or attempted rapes.

Perhaps his most disturbing tale, however, is not one of rape, but of incest. The story of Myrrha appears in book 10, emphatically positioned at the centre of a long narrative by the bard Orpheus. It is chillingly graphic, told in lewd detail and with a perverse irony that is characteristic of Ovid. Ostensibly it serves as a moral lesson, a warning against 'forbidden passions' (*Met.* 10. 153–4), but there is also an erotic element to the story that is reminiscent of Ovid's earlier love poetry. This raises an intriguing question: is Ovid setting out to moralize or to titillate?

Orpheus' moral misgivings about this 'abominable' tale

Superficially, at least, the story of Myrrha takes the form of a traditional parable. The main character commits a crime – in this case, incest with her father Cinyras – and is duly punished by the gods by being transformed into a tree. Certainly this is the interpretation encouraged by Orpheus in his rhetorical preamble. It is so 'abominable', he claims, that fathers and daughters ought not to listen, while he is eager

to assure his audience that the crime was punished, and that nothing similar has been witnessed in his homeland. Cupid himself, traditionally the author of so much amorous mischief, refuses to accept any responsibility for Myrrha's incestuous passion, and this immediately distinguishes her tale from the lighter-hearted romances of the *Metamorphoses*.

The crime itself more than lives up to the expectations which Orpheus raises. Not content simply to lust after her father, Myrrha tricks him into sleeping with her while drunk, even repeating the act for several nights. Orpheus adds the detail that her mother was practising ritual abstinence, putting the daughter's impiety into even sharper focus. His tendentious narrative leaves the reader in no doubt of his views; in his description of the first night of incest, some twenty-five lines in length, Orpheus uses no fewer than eight different synonyms for 'ominous', while the word 'crime' appears five times in various forms. As he had predicted, Myrrha gets her comeuppance when, upon being discovered, she is forced to flee from her home in fear of her life and eventually collapses of exhaustion, to be turned into a tree – an ironic punishment, considering the unnaturalness of the incest. If taken at face value, therefore, her story falls neatly into the pattern of crime and retribution that appears so often in the *Metamorphoses*, and in this sense it appears to be a conventional moral lesson.

Muddying the moral waters

But is it really as straightforward as all that? For one thing, Orpheus is not entirely unsympathetic in his treatment of Myrrha.

It is a sign of Ovid's skill as a storyteller that he manages both to condemn her and empathize with her; the story of Myrrha is characterized by these contradictions. It is a terrible tale, Orpheus claims – too terrible for the ears of his listeners – but nevertheless he proceeds to tell it at length and in graphic detail. Cupid initially denies responsibility for the illicit love affair, but later on, it is implied that the goddess Venus was indeed to blame for Myrrha's downfall. Most interestingly of all, her metamorphosis is presented, not as a punishment, but as a liberation. This seems to contradict Orpheus' earlier emphatic assertion: 'Believe that the crime was punished' (*Met.* 10.303). He reminds his listeners that Myrrha's fate could have been much worse, and that it is only by the merciful 'gift' of darkness that she is able to flee from her father and escape death. Myrrha herself pleads for the metamorphosis as a respite from her torturous emotion and pain, and the gods do not punish her so much as take pity on her. There is no trace of Orpheus' earlier vilification in his concluding lines, and the myrrh which he previously dismissed as worthless is now considered an 'honour', through which Myrrha gains immortality – hardly a fitting punishment for a crime as awful as hers. Therefore it seems to be mercy, not retribution, that Orpheus advocates, and in this respect his narrative is not a typical moral tale.

Orpheus further undermines his initial condemnation of Myrrha by questioning her culpability. At no point does he present her as an eager participant in the crime, as Ovid does with Byblis, which is the only other incest narrative to appear in the *Metamorphoses*, in book 9. Despite briefly entertaining the idea that her passions are natural, Myrrha ultimately concludes that to commit such a sin would be to 'defile great Nature's unbreakable bonds' and she resolves that she would rather kill herself than continue to harbour her 'evil passion' (*Met.* 10.353, 342). Suicide, to the austere Romans, was considered an honourable death, favoured by virtuous but defiled women such as the

legendary Lucretia, who killed herself out of shame after she was raped. Myrrha's motivations are not as pure – Orpheus states she was driven to suicide by her inability to formulate a plan, rather than by her guilt – but there can be no doubt about the shame she feels. Even during his description of the act itself, it is her 'virginal fear' that Orpheus emphasizes; there is no mention of her joy at finally satiating her lust. As she approaches the bedchamber, she seems to feel no excitement, only dread and remorse, yet by now it is too late to turn back and the unwilling Myrrha is driven on towards her inevitable downfall. Orpheus presents her less as a villain, therefore, and more as a victim, fully aware of her perversity but unable to control the course of events.

Who is to blame?

Instead it is the other characters in the story who provide the driving force for her crime. The nurse in particular is essential to the plot, for without her intervention, Myrrha would have succeeded in her suicide attempt and the story would have ended very differently. It is the nurse who formulates the plan to deceive Myrrha's father Cinyras into sleeping with his daughter, and when Myrrha falters as she approaches her father's bed, it is the nurse who takes her hand and urges her on. Initially, at least, her intentions are sincere, as she realizes that facilitating the incest is the only way to prevent her beloved charge from killing herself – rather like the actions of the nurse in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Yet her delight after Myrrha's sexual union with her father – 'My darling child, rejoice!...we've won...' – seems excessive, given her earlier horror, and contrasts sharply with Myrrha's own misgivings and confused emotions: 'The ill-starred girl felt no whole-hearted joy. Foreboding filled her soul with sadness...' The nurse does not appear to share Myrrha's acute moral awareness, and Orpheus makes no mention of any feeling of guilt on her part for her role in the crime; in this sense she is a much less appealing character than Myrrha, yet it is the latter who is punished.

Cinyras, too, must accept some of the blame. Unlike Myrrha, he is unaware of his lover's true identity and therefore cannot be held responsible for the incest itself, but his willingness to sleep with a girl his daughter's age, particularly while his wife is undergoing a period of religious abstinence, is surely reprehensible. On the first night he is excused by being drunk, yet this does not explain why he continues to repeat the act for several nights afterwards, and he seems to be in full possession of his senses when he decides to uncover his lover's identity with a torch. In the bedroom it is clear that, like the nurse, he takes the lead, 'urging on the

fearful girl'; but like the nurse, he does not appear to feel any guilt.

It is interesting to note that, in three of the four animal references that Myrrha uses to justify her incestuous feelings, the male is the subject. However great her passion, she lacks the courage to initiate a sexual relationship with her father herself – she is still hesitant even as she approaches the bed – so the incest relies on the encouragement of the other characters. Yet to the reader's knowledge, neither the nurse nor Cinyras is punished for their part in the crime, and this seems to undermine Orpheus' earlier proclamation of justice: the unashamed instigators of the crime escape without punishment, while the repentant victim bears all the consequences of their actions. In one sense, to paraphrase the Book of Exodus (20:5), the sin of the father is literally visited on the daughter.

Questioning moral conventions...

It seems, then, that the story of Myrrha is not a simple moral lesson, as it might initially appear, but rather a challenge to traditional morality. Yet Ovid – always one for controversy – takes this challenge even further by raising the contentious question of whether incest itself is natural. It is Myrrha who first questions the traditional taboo against sexual relationships between father and daughters, arguing that it is merely a social construct and that 'what nature freely allows us, the jealous law will refuse' (lines 330–1). She justifies her argument with examples from the animal kingdom and from distant countries where incest is permitted. Orpheus seems to conclude that it is indeed a crime, and the pejorative tone with which he describes the act itself leaves his audience in no doubt of his views. But the question has already been raised.

Myrrha's metamorphosis into a tree, described by Orpheus in vivid detail, might signify the transformation of incest into something natural and lawful; it is ironic that she finds her respite in nature and in a distant country, the two places where she believed her incest would have been permitted. The works of Freud and Jung have put forward the idea that father-lust might be an intrinsic, if subconscious, part of the female psyche, the so-called 'Electra complex', so there is some justification for Ovid's argument. Yet he leaves it to his readers to decide for themselves how 'natural' incest is, content, for his part, simply to have raised this contentious and provocative issue in their minds. This is characteristic of the *Metamorphoses*: readers are led to question the social values they take for granted and to revise their opinions of well-known myths, much like Orpheus does over the course of the narrative as he tells it.

Myrrha's story could be defined as a lesson in morality, therefore, but not in the way that we might expect: it teaches us to challenge and to interrogate rather than conform to conventional morals.

...and titillating the reader

If Orpheus' story is not, as he initially claims, a condemnation of incest, then perhaps his censorious narrative serves another, more suggestive purpose. It is clear that he does not expect his preliminary warning to be heeded, since he feels it necessary to introduce two further conditions – that his listeners do not believe his story, or that they believe it was punished. He further distances himself from the events to follow by asserting that they took place in a country far away, and that such horrors have never been witnessed in his homeland. His technique is one of reverse psychology; by emphasizing the monstrosity of the crime and warning his audience not to listen, he lures them into listening with even greater curiosity. The rest of his account could be interpreted simply as anticipation of the inevitable deed, as Orpheus gradually heightens the tension: first through Myrrha's long, impassioned monologues, and then through her ominous approach to the bedchamber. The climax of the story, the act of incest itself, is only described briefly, but is indeed as disturbing as promised in the preamble. Ovid's description of her 'virginal fears' as she approaches her father's bed is a deliberate echo of the 'virginal fear' which is how her father interpreted her tears on being confronted with the task of choosing a husband. This echo draws a chilling contrast between her earlier filial modesty and her incestuous lust. Ovid elaborates on this further, speculating that the two lovers might even call each other 'father' and 'daughter', and in this way he exploits, with characteristic black humour, the ironic potential of the situation. Even as she leaves the chamber, he includes a graphic reminder of her crime in his description of the 'unholy seed' she carries. These crude details border on the pornographic, and Ovid succeeds in simultaneously captivating and repulsing his audience. His pejorative tone and his categorical condemnation of the incest further enhance its allure; it is forbidden and therefore more exciting. In this respect, then, the story of Myrrha is certainly pornographic in that Orpheus intends to shock and thrill his reader.

Is the *Metamorphoses* pornographic?

Yet if Ovid's readers were only expecting pornography, they would be sorely disappointed with the *Metamorphoses*. His description of Myrrha's incest is certainly

disturbing, but it is also brief and not nearly as graphic as might be expected; the sexual act itself is only implied, while the salacious details are teasingly kept to a minimum. Nor is Myrrha's tale typical of the *Metamorphoses*, for hers is one of only two incest narratives and few of Ovid's stories are as graphic, even the numerous rapes. Certainly in comparison with the frankness of other poets, such as Catullus, in dealing with sexual material, the *Metamorphoses* seem relatively tame. One possible explanation for this is the political context of the times in which Ovid was writing. Augustus was trying to impose strict moral standards on the upper classes, and so he would not take kindly to any overtly pornographic poetry, particularly from a writer as popular as Ovid. In his later poetry, Ovid claimed that it was a 'poem' (*carmen*) as well as a 'crime' (*crimen*) which led to his exile to the Black Sea, and fear of the moralizing authorities might also explain why he feels the need, semantically, to disguise the story of Myrrha as a moral lesson.

Yet this argument, on closer inspection, is unconvincing. Another Ovidian poem, the *Art of Seduction* (*Ars Amatoria*), which is often assumed to be the work which precipitated Ovid's banishment, was published fully 8 years before his exile, while the *Metamorphoses* was not published until afterwards. Moreover, his poetry was scarcely more indecent than that of his contemporaries, such as Propertius, Tibullus, and Horace, whose work was circulated freely during Augustus' reign. If Ovid was only concerned with pornography, therefore, he could afford to be far more explicit, and it is interesting that he chooses not to. The *Metamorphoses* represented a turning point in his career, a point at which he abandons the light-hearted love poetry of his early years and turns his attention to more serious themes. The transition is evident in his choice of the dactylic hexameter, the favoured metre of epic poets such as Homer and Virgil, instead of the elegiac couplets associated with love poetry and other 'lower', more frivolous forms of verse. Old habits die hard and Ovid's salacious sense of humour is still very apparent in the *Metamorphoses*; the story of Myrrha is only one example of this. But the *Metamorphoses* was clearly intended to be an epic poem, not a love poem, and to describe it as purely pornographic would be to overlook its narrative complexity – a great insult to a writer who considered himself the equal of Virgil.

Ovid's subversive poem: defying (literary and moral) conventions

The *Metamorphoses* is a work that refuses to conform to genre, and neither of the categories 'pornography' versus 'moral

lessons' does justice to its great scope and diversity. The tale of Myrrha, while certainly suggestive, is not as explicit as it could have been, and its subject matter is far too complex to be dismissed as mere erotica. Ovid seems more interested in the issue of morality, but not in its conventional form. Instead he takes a well-known myth and turns it upside down, questioning all its fundamental principles: whether the culprit *is* really the culprit, whether the punishment really *is* a punishment, and indeed whether the crime really *is* a crime. Ovid's intention is not to uphold traditional morals but subtly to challenge them, to cause his readers to rethink their initial interpretations of the myths they take for granted. His purpose is at once both subversive and anarchic, reflecting perhaps his personal ambivalence about Augustan rule, and yet he also depicts the complexity of life with all its moral contradictions and ambiguities. As Ezra Pound observed, 'a great treasure of verity exists for mankind in Ovid and in the subject of Ovid's long poem'.

Ellie Moodey won the 2011 Gladstone Prize with this essay. She is a student at Shrewsbury School. For this year's competition see inside back cover.